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Speaking With and Without Words—An Analysis of Foster Children’s Expressions and Behaviors That Are Suggestive of Prior Sexual Abuse

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ABSTRACT

This exploratory study reports on foster children’s informal self-disclosures of previously unknown histories of sexual abuse. Data were collected from 40 children’s files, and an inductive thematic analysis of verbal and behavioral expressions was conducted. Findings suggest that foster children’s self-disclosures can be fragmented, spontaneous, narrative, or triggered and often occur during everyday activities in the foster family. The children disclose their past by referring to the perpetrator or the severity of the abuse or by acting out, mostly by reenacting sexual abuse experiences. In addition, some children use childish vocabulary focusing on genitals or sexual acts they were involved in or want to be involved in. Last, some foster children seem to be linguistically challenged to disclose that a female person abused them or that they were forced to reciprocate sexually. This study adds to the understanding of the complex process of child sexual abuse disclosure in the context of foster care.

KEYWORDS

child sexual abuse; disclosure; children; foster care; case file research; trauma; foster parents

A child’s statement like “at Mommy’s house we kissed each other on the penis” shocks most people, makes them wonder to what the child is referring, and leaves them at loss as to how to respond. For a number of foster family members hearing such a statement is reality, as many victims of sexual abuse are identified among children growing up in foster care (Grietens, Van Oijen, & Ter Huizen, 2012; Euser, Alink, Tharner, Van IJzendoorn, & Bakermans-Kranenburg, 2013). In some cases, foster family members are the first to actually learn of the child’s past sexual abuse during their fostering experience. Yet, although the complicated process of child sexual abuse disclosure has been centered in previous research and many features of this process in a variety of contexts have been explored (see for instance, Anderson, 2016; Katz et al., 2012; McElvaney, Greene, & Hogan, 2014; Ronai, 1995; Sorensen & Snow, 1991), little empirical research has been done on the initial, informal disclosure process in the natural context of everyday life in a foster family.

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An informal disclosure or a “self-disclosure” of child sexual abuse can be done over a longer period of time as it gradually unfolds (Jensen, Gulbrandsen, Mossige, Reichelt, & Tjersland, 2005; McElvaney, 2015; Paine & Hansen, 2002). Reitsema and Grietens (2015) stress the perspective on child sexual abuse disclosure in everyday contexts “as a fluid, ongoing and interactional process” (p.2). Similarly, Gries and colleagues (2000) report that disclosure of child sexual abuse is a dynamic event. Overall, research suggests that an informal disclosure by children is in most cases not an isolated, singular event. However, the development of the disclosure process is not always clear, since a disclosure needs to be interpreted as such. Jensen (2005) explores this possible interpretation problem in her study on signs of sexual abuse. She states that words, expressions, tokens, and even the lack thereof can be signs of sexual abuse. However, these signs need to be singled out as meaningful, upon which they require the right interpretation. Interpretation is particularly challenging when a child discloses by means of behavior instead of words.

According to Alaggia (2004), behavior is highly problematic as a disclosure type, partly because the child’s disclosing behaviors might not be interpreted adequately, as the observing adults attribute the behaviors to everyday stressors in the children’s lives and not to their sexual abuse history. For example, in Alaggia’s study the participants disclosed using nonverbal behavior intentionally to alert people that something was wrong. Examples of disclosing behaviors are temper tantrums, angry outbursts, clinginess, or avoidance of certain situations. Similarly, other studies reflect on behavioral cues as part of a disclosure. According to McFadden (1989), foster parents managing the behavior of a sexually abused foster child should bear in mind “that the behavior may be a form of communication about earlier sexual abuse” (p. 99). In addition, Reitsema and Grietens (2015) suggest considering emotional and behavioral signs as a part of the development of a disclosure discourse, because an isolated interpretation of these signs can be challenging.

Another problem is that of overinterpreting behaviors as signs of sexual abuse. Before placement, many foster children had several adverse life experiences in addition to experiences with sexual abuse (Cook et al., 2005; Dovran, Winje, Arefjord, & Haugland, 2012; Greeson et al., 2012; Vanderfaeillie, Vanschoonlandt, Van Holen, De Maeyer, & Robberechts, 2014). These traumatic life experiences can cause behaviors similar to the disclosing behaviors children with a history of sexual abuse may exhibit. Furthermore, as Lowenstein (2011) stresses, some sexual behaviors are normal at a certain age. Some children, for instance, explore their sexuality through sexual play, and therefore this behavior is not always a sign of prior experiences with sex (Hornor, 2004). Hence, we need to be cautious when interpreting behavior as a disclosure of sexual abuse.

The context in which the disclosure is embedded seems to be of major importance to interpret behavioral disclosures adequately. For example, Jensen and colleagues (2005) and Jensen (2005) note how the context of a

situation frames the child's cues to disclose sexual abuse and how the significance of signs of sexual abuse alters within different contexts. Reitsema and Grietens (2015) emphasize the importance of a careful consideration of the context of a behavioral disclosure in order to interpret the manifestations adequately. However, Jensen (2005) argues that words or verbal utterances could also be misinterpreted when the context does not provide enough information to understand the right connotation. For example, a child's usage of the word "hair" could refer to facial hair or pubic hair, dependent on the contextual embedment of the dialogue. Hence, challenges can also arise in the interpretation of verbal disclosures of child sexual abuse.

More specifically, several studies highlight the problematic dialogical component of a disclosure, thereby stressing the crucial role of the interaction partner or the interpreter (see for instance, Goodman-Brown, Edelstein, Goodman, Jones, & Gordon, 2003; Herskowitz, Lanes & Lamb, 2007; Jensen, 2005; McElvaney, Green & Hogan, 2012; Staller & Nelson-Gardell, 2005). As illustrated by Flåm and Haugstvedt (2013) in their study on the first signs of sexual abuse, difficulties arise "to what can be said or asked about, by whom, where, when and how utterances can be understood" (p. 639). This study shows how children test whether the person to whom they turned is willing and able to explore what had happened to them. The trusted person's response to these sometimes indirect, initial, minimal disclosure attempts, so-called "test balloons," is suggested to be pivotal to the continuation of the verbal disclosure. In a like manner, Jensen and colleagues (2005) argue that children are more inclined to disclose when they feel there is an opportunity or purpose to talk and when both parties share a focus on sexual abuse or a topic closely linked to sex or sexual abuse. Jensen and colleagues as well as Flåm and Haugstvedt (2013) state that the interacting partner has a major influence on the process of disclosure as children use the interlocutor's response as a reference point to continue, delay, or cease the disclosure process.

The main caregiver seems to play a significant role in the functioning of a child after a disclosure. For example, a positive reaction to a disclosure, specifically full support of a foster parent following a disclosure, is key in the child's positive emotional functioning (Gries et al., 2000). However, the interacting partners, especially caregivers or peers of the disclosing child, may have specific needs following a disclosure, such as support in managing the child's behavior or adopting functional coping strategies and managing their own emotions (Toledo & Seymour, 2016).

As previous research suggests, it is to be expected that foster family members are of major importance in their foster child's disclosure process as possible first interlocutors in an informal disclosure dialogue. An adequate interpretation of the initial disclosure attempts and a supportive response is mostly dependent on them. However, the context of a foster family might cause additional challenges to the disclosure process. For example, when a

child's behavior is not as expected "it became a sign to be interpreted," as Jensen illustrates (2005, p. 471). Yet foster families and their foster children, not including children in kinship care, often do not know one another at first and mutual expectations have not been established. Many behaviors or verbal expressions can be unexpected according to one's own normative perspective. As both parties do not have a shared past, they need time to attune to one another's verbal communication, behavior, and personality. Moreover, as conversations about sex, sexuality, and sexual abuse are embedded in cultural values and beliefs on a macrolevel of a society as well as on a the microlevel of a family (Fontes & Plummer, 2010; Jensen, 2005), again foster family members and their foster children need to adapt to one another.

As illustrated, there are several challenges in the interpretation of a foster child's verbal and behavioral cues that may indicate sexual abuse. The present study is on reports in foster children's case files regarding possible informal disclosures of sexual abuse. More specifically, we aim to explore verbal expressions and behaviors by which foster children possibly disclose a previously unknown history of sexual abuse. We want to answer the following questions:

- (1) Which verbal expressions of foster children possibly indicating sexual abuse are documented in their case files?
- (2) Which behaviors of foster children possibly indicating sexual abuse are documented in their case files?

Method

Selection of cases

We conducted our study in one foster care organization in the northern part of the Netherlands. This organization operates in various regions of the Netherlands and offers services comparable to other Dutch foster care organizations. All foster care workers in the agency were asked to review their past and present caseload and identify suspected and substantiated cases of sexual abuse in foster children previous to placement in the current foster family. As this study was aimed to understand processes of disclosing sexual abuse to foster carers and the coding of data proved to be time-consuming during a pilot study, the first 40 files meeting the inclusion criteria were studied. Only two files contained reports of foster parents who were informed about a child's sexual abuse experience prior to placement in their family.

The data collection

A coding scheme was developed based on relevant literature on child sexual abuse signs (for example, Friedrich, 1998; Hall, Mathews, & Pearce, 2002; Jensen, 2005;

Putnam, 2003), and in a preliminary study a pilot with this scheme was conducted. Some modifications to the original coding scheme were made after this pilot, and a supplement document was written to clarify ambiguous terms or categories. The scheme consisted of following categories: sexualized behavior, internalizing behavior, externalizing behavior, physical problems, verbal expressions of the abuse, features of the child's development, and unexpected reactions to everyday situations. The latter category contains all behavior not specified or fitting the other categories of problem behavior. With the approval from the ethics committee of our department, the case files were coded, and all relevant verbatim clauses were noted in the coding scheme per child. The categories could contain multiple phrases or parts of phrases from a child's case file; for instance, the category "unexpected reactions to everyday situations" for one child could read "has a strong reaction when picked up by men" and "wets herself when stressed." All researchers involved discussed ambiguous information in order to guard the intersubjectivity of the data.

Data analysis

All verbatim clauses in two relevant categories ("verbal expressions of the abuse" and "unexpected reactions to everyday situations") were coded inductively by two researchers separately, using principles of open coding (Bazeley, 2013). Consequently, the data from these categories were classified as the "verbal disclosure group" and the "behavioral disclosure group." A third independent rater was also asked to identify codes. The three interpretations of the data have been discussed thoroughly, and differences in interpretation were resolved by seeking consensus. A final codebook was created based on these discussions and by merging the interpretations of the raters. This codebook contains four clusters of codes: "content of the verbal expressions," "linguistic features of the expressions," "type of behavioral reaction," and "context."

Results

The sample

The group of 40 files was equally divided in terms of gender. Three children resided in kinship care, and the majority (82,5%) was between ages 8 to 15. In 10 files, legal actions concerning the sexual abuse were reported: either the abuse was proven in a court of law or the perpetrator was prosecuted. The allegations of abuse in the remaining cases (75.5%) have not been substantiated. Twenty-one case files contained information on biological parents being the alleged perpetrator, specifically 13 fathers and 8 mothers. The children's files contained information of 27 possible caregiving perpetrators. Six children were sexually abused by 3 or more people, and 16 children were abused by 1 or 2 people. In the remaining 18 files, no information

about the alleged perpetrator was recorded. The documented severity of the abuse ranged from being exposed to sexual stimuli to being prostituted. However, for the majority of the children this information remained unknown (65%).

Demographics of the disclosure groups

We found verbal expressions indicating a history of sexual abuse for 23 foster children. However, we included only the files of 22 children in the analysis, as one child's file reported that the history of sexual abuse was known prior to placement in foster care. In 15 files we identified possible behavioral disclosures. Both groups consisted of mostly girls: in the verbal disclosure group 13 files were of girls (59%), and 10 girls' files were included in the behavioral group (67%). The average age of the disclosing children was 10 years, with the youngest being 3 years old and the oldest 16 years at the time of the data collection.

The disclosure data were not presented in a chronological manner, therefore the timing of the disclosure remained unknown. Thus, we had no knowledge whether the information in the files was recorded and then the sexual abuse suspicion arose or whether the information was documented as to support an existing abuse hypothesis. Sexual abuse was not the primary reason for out-of-home-placement for any children in the disclosure group. One file contained ambiguous information on a pregnancy and stated "abuse of child." We understood this as the abuse of the foster child's child. As the files covered only a child's foster care trajectory, we presumed the disclosures occurred after placement in a foster family.

It appeared that for those children who verbally disclosed, more information about the abuse was reported as opposed to the children who remained silent or communicated via behavioral signs. For example, in 8 of the 22 files reporting verbal disclosure, the perpetrator was either charged or prosecuted. In addition, it seemed that for the majority of children who verbally disclosed, the suspected severity of the abuse was documented. The files gave accounts of the following severity of abuse: exposed to sexual stimuli, abuse without active involvement of the child ($n = 2$), sexual touch ($n = 3$), penetration, oral, or anal sex ($n = 3$), and forced intercourse ($n = 4$). For 5 of the 7 children who have been sexually penetrated, it is reported that the abuse started prior to their 4th birthday. For 6 verbally disclosing children, data about the alleged perpetrator was missing; however, in the case files of the remaining 16 children the perpetrator was known. Most files of the children of both disclosure groups mentioned biological parents as the perpetrator.

The extent and type of disclosure

Singular or multiple disclosures

In general, the amount of documented disclosures differed per child. In 11 files (41%) we identified either 1 verbal disclosure or 1 behavioral disclosure.

Only 2 of these 11 singular disclosures held actual references to the past: both were verbal expressions of a child about the abuse. The rest of the disclosures centered around present events. For example, 2 children invited a caregiving person to engage in a sexual situation: “asked her foster father to lay on top of her.” Three files, which reported a singular behavioral disclosure, described how the child manifested behavior in a location where the child was partially unclothed; for example, “The child hides behind a towel in the toilet.” Another singular behavioral disclosure was a response to a biological father: “During the contact with birth parents, the child tried to please father and looked at him in a romantic way.” None of these 11 files contained information on the severity of the sexual abuse. In the remaining files we observed a large number of utterances. In most of these case files the level of detail in the utterances was notably higher, such as, “During playtime with her foster sister, her sibling kissed the child on her back. The child responded by saying: You can kiss me on my pussy.”

We found that the number of disclosures reported and their level of detail needed to be reviewed together. For example, a child “pressed her legs together when she was wiped down after a shower” would be notably rejection of touch of the child’s private body parts, possibly indicating a previous negative experience. Yet this isolated situation might not automatically support a suspicion of sexual abuse, although the child’s reaction might have made foster parents alert. For this child, however, the case file mentioned more possible behavioral and verbal disclosures, and it contained more details, creating a clearer picture of the child’s past: This was the child that said “at Mommy’s house we kissed each other on the penis.” This statement, explicitly referring to a sexual act, helped to interpret the child’s hesitance during the wipe-down.

Narrative, spontaneous, or triggered disclosure

Two types of utterances emerged from the data: a narrative type and a more spontaneous type. The narrative expressions, used by 10 children, all concerned a narrative on sexual acts performed on the child or by the child. The use of the word “told” (in Dutch “vertelt”) was the common feature in these phrases. The files of 6 children recorded these narrative disclosures in general words, though often the case files included more details of the narrative. Although the verbatim sentences were written by social workers, their use of the verb “tell” implicated the child to be telling a story, unlike some children that had spontaneously “said” something. Thirteen files showed records of such spontaneous remarks, which mostly included the verbs “said” or “asked.” For instance, “While showing his penis, the child said his dad squeezes and rubs him there.”

In 18 files we observed triggered behaviors. For example, most children reacted to people ($n = 9$) or to touch and/or physical intimacy ($n = 7$). Three children responded to nude people: “froze when other small children walked

around naked in the campsite.” In addition, 2 files described a reaction to visual stimuli, for instance a kissing scene in a movie. We identified other patterns in the details in the reports of a disclosure, which this article will explore.

Content of the disclosures

The children appeared to either disclose information about past experiences or by commenting or behaving in a certain way in the present.

Disclosure of the past

Reference to the perpetrator

Ten children's files contained 25 disclosures regarding alleged perpetrators. These 10 victims said they were abused by their father ($n = 4$), mother ($n = 4$), brother ($n = 4$), both parents ($n = 2$), and/or other males outside their family ($n = 4$). One child stated he “was forced to reenact a [sex] movie on his sisters,” making him a forced perpetrator. All children who disclosed their father's involvement identified him as an active perpetrator in multiple occasions. Either the fathers touched the child or the child witnessed sexual acts involving their father. For example, “The child said: just rub it until it's stiff, that's what Dad does.” Thrice a child disclosed being actively abused by his mother, as they “kissed with the tongue,” “touched a child's pussy,” or “did things with boys.” One mother seemed to consent to the abuse as she “was present but did not stop the abusing men.” In addition, 2 children stated that something happened “at Mommy's house.”

The severity of the abuse

The disclosed severity of abuse ranged from being exposed to sexual stimuli to suffering penetration. Four children expressed they saw pornography ($n = 3$) or people having sex ($n = 3$): “The child stated he watched parents having sex.” One child stated he saw his mother being sexually abused, but “he, at that time, thought it was normal and he did not know how to help.” All children who disclosed being exposed to sexual stimuli also disclosed being actively abused. The accounts of the actively abused children, with the exception of one child's file, contained details about the abuse they suffered. Seven children disclosed explicitly what happened to them: 3 children spoke of undergoing digital touch, 3 children disclosed oral–genital contact, once the making of “photographs” was mentioned, and another child “had to reenact sex movies.” Although this last child might have been referring to it, none of these children spoke of suffering or performing genital or anal penetration. One child disclosed in detail how he witnessed his little sister being penetrated. The 7 children who are reported to have been sexually penetrated mostly spoke of witnessing sexual acts or suffering digital touch,

or they have disclosed their past in general terms. The average age of these 7 children is 12 years, with the youngest being 9 years old (the witness of penetration) and the oldest 15. For several children, the files contained only a disclosure in general terms, therefore we could not determine the severity of the abuse that occurred.

Disclosure through present events

Invitations for sex, interest in nudity, and a focus on genitals

Several children made possibly disclosing comments on present events, most of which indicated a reenactment of sexual abuse experiences. First, seven children invited foster siblings ($n = 3$), peers ($n = 3$), fostering adults ($n = 2$), or others ($n = 3$) to engage in sexual acts. One boy “asked his foster sisters if they wanted to have sex,” and another told his peers to “put your genitals in someone else’s mouth.” Second, three children actually seemed to reenact a sexual situation: “When her diaper was changed, she turned to lie on her stomach and lifted her bottom.” Furthermore, six children’s files contained observations of heightened sexual interest, as they made sexualized comments, such as, “When seeing nude people, he makes remarks and keeps on looking.” Last, several expressions of children remained uncategorized, as they neither refer to sexual acts nor indicate a heightened sexual interest. These not otherwise specified expressions ($n = 11$) had one thing in common: all, in some way, centered genitals. For example, one child pointed at her genitals and “asked her foster mother what she taught of her middle part” and another child stated “he is his mother’s little willy.”

Drawing back, freezing, or becoming distressed

The children’s unexpected responses to everyday life events appeared to be behavioral disclosures. For instance, six children drew back from everyday activities concerning body care, sex education, or being lifted: “After reading a book about sexuality in class, she crawled away” or “The child refuses to be lifted.” In addition, several children showed anxious behavior as a response to events; one child “peed her pants when a boy drew a picture on her stomach.” Other children froze as a response or became distressed. Examples of this are: “Child becomes paralyzed in the presence of people in swimming trunks” and “The child is upset while taking a shower, yanks her own breasts.” Some files simply stated that a child had a strong reaction: “strong reaction to kissing scenes in a movie.”

Features of the disclosures

Where and to whom the child disclosed

In the case files many reports of disclosures, verbal or behavioral, were embedded in contextual details, such as the location of the situation. The majority of the disclosures ($n = 12$) took place in the bathroom or in a

location where the child was partially unclothed. The following excerpt illustrated such a situation: “When her diaper was changed when she was a baby, she became as stiff as a board.” Three times the disclosure occurred during bedtime or in a bedroom.

The interaction partner was mentioned in 19 files: The majority of the children disclosed to foster family members ($n = 10$). For example, one boy “tells the foster family a detailed story about the sexual abuse.” Furthermore, some foster children disclosed to their peers ($n = 5$) or a biological family member ($n = 3$). One file mentioned how a foster mother prompted the disclosure by asking a child directly if “someone ever touched her pussy” when she saw the child’s genitals reddened. This was the only record of a verbally prompted disclosure; the other records suggested the previously described types of verbal disclosures.

The language of children

As expected, some children disclosed in a childlike manner. Although it required some translation, typically the meaning of this child-language was easily understood. Numerous children referred to sexual acts, nudity, or genitals in child-language, such as “the child told that a boy touched her peepee.” Some children created a visual image of a sexual act using childlike vocabulary. For instance, one boy stated “that boys start to pee when they see naked buttocks.” The verb “pee” seemed to be adopted by this boy to describe an ejaculation. Similarly, another child mentioned seeing “pee came out of a penis into her.”

Other victims used childlike vocabulary inviting others to engage in sexual acts. Seven of these invitations included juvenile synonyms for genitals; for instance, one child “asked his foster brother to draw a little poophole on the Barbie, so he could lick it.” Four children’s invitation concerned oral sex, of which 2 children offered to perform it and 2 offered themselves to perform on. Two boys invited someone to help them to get an erection: “The child asked foster mother would you tighten my penis?” One child asked to perform a sexual act on an adult: “The child said to her grandfather she wanted to fidget around his penis.” Next to these invitations, 7 of the 11 “not otherwise specified” expressions have been coded being “child-language,” and again almost all children referred to their own or someone else’s genitals. For example, “pulls up foster father’s shirt and said: Daddy has penis.”

Active or passive part in the abuse

When reviewing the children’s files, we found that they mostly express or reenact sexual abuse as a passive party. For example, as some children witnessed sexual acts, they had an inactive role in the abuse. The verbally disclosing children often referred to what they suffered in the past by centering the actions of the perpetrator in their expressions. Other children expressed their willingness to engage in sexual acts in the present, yet they

adopted a passive role in the experience: “Do you want to lick my penis?” In total, 20 disclosures suggested, either explicitly or implicitly, a child’s passive part in the abuse. Yet 9 disclosures suggested a child’s active performance in a sexual act, either in the past ($n = 3$) or in the present ($n = 9$). For example, one child “lies on top of dolls, rides them, and asks is it nice and does it hurt.” In 3 files the active or passive role of the child remained ambiguous, because their expressions indicated either having suffered digital abuse or being present while a man masturbated.

Discussion

There are several challenges in the interpretation of disclosures of sexual abuse by children. For instance, a disclosure tends to be dynamic, often existing of ambiguous references, while depending strongly on the receiver in order to develop. Because the interpretation process is so complicated, especially for foster families, more knowledge is instrumental to optimize the care for sexually abused children. The present study aimed to explore verbal expressions and behaviors by which foster children disclose a previously unknown history of sexual abuse.

Significance of the major findings

The results of this study indicate that verbal information of a child leads to a more detailed report of the sexual abuse in a child’s file, yet the extent of the reported disclosures varies strongly, as singular as well as more elaborate disclosures are described in the children’s files. Similar to what Reitsema and Grietens (2015) suggest, our results reflect the trouble of foster families interpreting a child’s singular isolated behavior or verbal expression as a disclosing manifestation, while multiple disclosure attempts can alert an interacting partner to “see” and “interpret” disclosures as such. Jensen (2005) even states that signs of sexual abuse accumulate meaning, as their meaning changes upon use. Furthermore, because the development of a child’s disclosure is strongly dependent on the interaction partner (Flåm & Haugstvedt, 2013), the variety in reported information can also be due to the fact that the foster family members do not have a long history together. For example, Jensen (2005) stresses that a parent and a child know each other and “lean on these experiences in new interpretations” (p. 475). Hence, it is not unexpected that in our data for almost half of the children in the disclosure group only one verbal or behavioral disclosure was found, as other disclosing attempts of a child may not have been noticed or interpreted accordingly.

When reviewing the content of the disclosures, we found implicit as well as explicit references to past experiences. The explicit references to the children’s past are mostly verbal and contain details about the sexual acts they suffered or about the perpetrator of the abuse. In the files of seven children who reported

penetration, only one witness account of penetration was found. For five of these children the abuse started in or around the preverbal stage and continued to the verbal memory stage. Therefore, our results indicate that they could have memories of penetration. This lack of disclosures concerning sexual penetration is in contrast to the study by Jensen and colleagues (2005), who describe how some initial alarming utterances of children in the ages of 3 to 7 years contain clear descriptions of penetration. It is possible that we found fewer reports of disclosure of penetration because the children in our study were older at the time of disclosure than the children in the study by Jensen and colleagues. According to Leach, Powell, Sharman, and Anglim (2017), age influences the likelihood of disclosure of penetration in a forensic interview. The authors argue that younger children are more likely to disclose penetration, as they are more likely to recognize this as abusive compared to other sexual incidents.

Furthermore, although the disclosing children report abuse by males and females, their disclosures mostly refer to males, specifically fathers. These men are clearly described as active perpetrators, while the abusing females (all mothers) are reported as perpetrators less frequently. In addition, the mothers are described as active or passive abusers. This finding is in accordance with other studies that point out the “passively consenting mother” as a common type of female abuser (Wijkman, Bijleveld, & Hendriks, 2010), whereas men are barely described as passive abusers in the literature. Although some children have identified a female as their abuser, it is interesting that so little is disclosed about the abuse by these women. Young children sexually abused by a female might not know what to refer to in their disclosure, as sex with a woman might be harder to “understand” than sex with a male. For example, as our data reveal, some children used urinating as a synonym to a male’s physical release, indicating they applied their knowledge of the bodily function of a penis to explain what they have witnessed. Furthermore, children often referred to (male) genitals in their disclosure; genitals too are perceptible. Conversely, sex with a female is elusive—a female’s orgasm is not tangible to another, yet a male’s orgasm can be witnessed, tasted, or touched. Therefore, there is less specific, tangible information a child can use to describe sex with a female. Consequently, a child’s attempt to disclose abuse by a female could also be more difficult to interpret.

When solely reviewing the linguistics of the verbal disclosure, we found that children mostly disclose their passive role in the sexual acts: They refer to themselves suffering the abuse, not performing sexual acts. Yet often perpetrators force children to reciprocate sexual acts or to perform sexual acts on adults. Sexual acts involving a female abuser more often require a child’s active performance than sexual acts involving a male. Mossige, Jensen, Gulbrandsen, Rechelt, and Tjersland (2005) conclude that children struggle attributing meaning to their sexual abuse experiences through their stories, resulting in less elaborate, more disorganized, and less coherent narratives than narratives on other stressful events. Furthermore, studies have shown

how strong feelings of shame, blame, and guilt arise in sexually abused children. Specifically, boys tend to become confused about their own contribution in the abuse situation as they experience physical arousal. These traumatic effects of sexual abuse in particular can cause delays in the disclosure process or even cause a full discontinuance of the disclosure (for instance, Finkelhor & Browne, 1985; Hershkowitz et al., 2007; Paine & Hansen, 2002). Our results imply that children disclose their past but limit their own actions linguistically, possibly to reconstruct the abuse they suffered as well as their forced contribution in the abuse.

Interestingly, the social workers responsible for the report in the children's files have thought it to be relevant to report childlike language, as our data reveal numerous reports of disclosure in a childlike vocabulary. Most of the disclosures in child-language center genitals or sexual acts the children were involved in or want to be involved in. These results correspond to the findings of Brilleslijper-Kater and Baartman (2000) and Jackson, Newall, and Backett-Milburn (2015). As in these studies, the children in our study used numerous names for male and female genitals. Moreover, Brilleslijper-Kater and Baartman (2000) state that children until the age of 6 have limited knowledge of sexuality, especially with regard to adult sexual behavior and body parts in relation to their sexual function. The non-sexually abused children in their study interpreted physical intimacy between adult and children in relation to their own experiences. Therefore, it is to be expected that (possibly) sexually abused children in the same age category interpret physical intimacy in relation to their own experiences similarly, as appears from the study by Jackson and colleagues (2015). These authors noted how children used sexually graphic language to communicate abuse experiences and had sufficient understanding of what had happened to them, yet, as appeared from their innocent vocabulary, they lacked in more general sexual knowledge. Similarly, in the present study some children disclosed the abuse graphically, adopting their own language.

The children's disclosures through present events are mostly directed at members of their foster family or at their peers in a location where physical intimacy or partial nudity can be expected, such as during bathing. This suggests such everyday life activities could offer a shared frame of reference for the child to disclose, as noted by Jensen and colleagues (2005). It can also be argued that the context of nudity triggers the children to recall their past, as McFadden (1989) states that the "three most likely places for sexual abuse to have occurred are bathroom, bedroom and car" (p. 96). In addition, next to a triggering nature, our results suggest that children often disclosed in locations where a certain amount of privacy was possible (Jensen et al., 2005). Thus we can conclude that certain everyday activities entailing physical intimacy can contain triggers for a child, yet the location of these activities can enable them to disclose prior negative experiences in a similar situation in private.

Strengths and limitations

It is important to consider the implications of using case file data, as certain restrictions in interpretation must be calculated. First, we assume the described situations and quotations in the children's files to be noteworthy to the foster parents, as they have reported the occurrences to their social worker. In addition, we assume that these social workers considered this information to be of interest and, thereby, an official report in the children's files was needed. However, we cannot be sure that this record of the children's testimonials is complete. For instance, as we could only rely on the information filed, we were to consider a singular sentence as context. Foster parents have more context to interpret their foster child's disclosure. Second, we must consider the implications of the social worker's decision when to report an incident. Often sexual abuse allegations remain unsubstantiated, yet social workers must choose what to report. It is possible that social workers hesitate to report unsubstantiated, very vague suspicions in order to protect the child being stigmatized. In addition, a social worker's belief in a disclosure also influences the documentation process.

Furthermore, several problems can arise concerning the validity of sign or disclosure interpretation. First, if we review the chronological development of a suspicion of sexual abuse and the timing of a disclosure thereof we distinguish two directions. On the one hand, either signs, disclosures, and report thereof can direct to a suspicion. On the other hand, when people suspect a child has been sexually abused, this can lead to an increase in the reports of disclosure in a child's files. Second, personal experiences may influence the validity of sign interpretation. For instance, foster parents who were victims of sexual abuse themselves or had prior experiences with abused foster children may interpret disclosure and disclosing behaviors differently than those who are novices in this area. Last, even though we continuously aimed to make our interpretations intersubjective through thorough discussion of the analysis and we critically reflected on our personal interpretations of the data, interpretation of signs is a dialogical process and the outcome is dependent on both interlocutors. Therefore, we as researchers influence the interpretation process.

These limitations notwithstanding, this study gives some important insights in the complex process of sexual abuse self-disclosure by foster children. Although each disclosure dialogue, or an attempt thereto, is situated in a unique context and relationship between the interlocutors, we found several patterns within our data. This suggests that the results are not completely idiosyncratic. Consequently, our interpretations are thought to be transferrable to similar cases in other foster care organizations. In addition, several of our findings are consistent to other international studies, therefore they seem to reach beyond the Dutch context.

Conclusion

The results of this study strengthen the perspective that children's self-disclosure of sexual abuse is a fragmented process, as through disclosing they also reconstruct their experiences. Therefore, it is understandable that children mostly structure their disclosure not by presenting themselves as active participants, as this would strengthen feelings of guilt and self-blame. Furthermore, it is possible that children are linguistically challenged to disclosing sexual abuse by females as they have less specific (sensory) information to refer to and know fewer words to describe female sexuality. Everyday activities in foster families can be threatening to a child as they may trigger memories of sexual abuse experiences. On the other hand, these activities can also create a shared frame of reference that facilitates a child to disclose.

Future directions

This study contributes to the knowledge on fostering a sexually abused child, as it lists possible verbal and nonverbal disclosure of sexual abuse and their features in everyday life activities. As a part of their training, foster parents should be informed of the range of possible disclosures so as to raise awareness in detecting them. Specifically, foster families should be informed that next to disclosure in the form of stories, disclosures also come in the form of a reaction to triggers, a spur-of-the-moment remark, or a question. As the contextual embedment of a disclosure can add to the interpretation of a child's behavior or utterance, foster families should be informed of the triggering nature of locations as the bathroom, the toilet, and the bedroom. In addition, foster parents should be aware of the pressing (emotional) dynamics of disclosing sexual abuse, such as when a child was forced to actively perform in the abuse. Also the (lack of) skills children have to disclose certain sexual acts (e.g., those committed by females) is of importance.

An open response or attitude is needed in order to invite a child to continue disclosing. Furthermore, a helpful response is one of sincere interest in a child's story or behavior, even though a confrontation with an abuse history can cause strong emotions in a foster parent. Foster parents should acknowledge the emotions inflicted by disclosures of sexual abuse, yet a recipient of a disclosure should not overburden a disclosing child with these emotions. Thus, for social workers, an important task is to guide foster families through the disclosing process and reflect on what the disclosure evokes.

Further research on the disclosure of sexual abuse including both the foster child and the foster family perspective needs to be conducted in order to provide additional knowledge to improve the everyday life of victims of sexual abuse in foster care. Research in young foster children will especially add to our understanding of care-specific challenges in the disclosure process.

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